

PBS MACNEIL/LEHRER NEWS HOUR

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NICARAGUA/USSR - * * * *

LEHRER: Well, let's go to the central issue. Ah, if there are MiGs there now or some other time, how serious--the president says this would be a serious matter for the United States--how serious a matter should it be?

HYDE: Well, it would be a serious escalation of tension that's already there. Honduras has an army of about 16,000. Ah, the army in Nicaragua is upwards of 75,000. And, ah, if they bring in these sophisticated fighter planes that are also bombers and can go or, ah, fully loaded 400 miles, ah, with, ah, tanks, a range of 400 miles, this would, ah, be very destabilizing, to use a favorite word. And, ah, I would think some action would have to be taken, not necessarily military at first. But there are economic sanctions, ah, diplomatic sanctions. Certainly, the Contadora process, which contemplates de-escalating the tensions and getting weaponry out of the area, would be, ah, certainly violated. And that's why I kind of have my doubts that the MiGs are there.

LEHRER: All right. What's your view of it, ah, Congressman Shannon, as to how big a deal this would be if they are there? SHANNON: Well, first of all, let me just say that I share Henry Hyde's doubts that they are there. And I think that we are all having this discussion on very, very skimpy information. I mean, even administration officials have said that they seriously doubt that there are MiGs there.

LEHRER: Well, then what's goin' on, Congressman?

SHANNON: I don't know what's going on. And I am a little bit chagrined that the intelligence community would leak this story so intently to the press on election night or Election Day or, you know, I don't know when it was, was leaked, and create all of this, ah, ah, fever of concern both in this country and Nicaragua.

LEHRER: Well, what... SHANNON: Ah, and I don't know what the political purpose behind that would be or what any other purpose, ah, might be. But I think it's terribly unfair to jump to the conclusion that the, ah, the MiGs are there. And I've been listening to the radio, and I've been getting telephone calls from people, ah, and they're having all sorts of great discussions about whether we should go in and take them out militarily if they are there. I doubt very seriously that there are MiGs in Nicaragua. If they were MiGs, I think that would be cause for concern of the United States.

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LEHRER: To do what? What should we do, Congressman Shannon? SHANNON: I, I think that we should go to the Security Council at the United Nations under those, ah, circumstances. Actually, more appropriately, Honduras, ah, should go to the Security Council. And we have legal means and procedures that we could follow, as Congressman Hyde, ah, pointed out. And this notion that you have to jump to some kind of military solution to everything, I think, is just absolutely dead wrong.

LEHRER: You agree we shouldn't, Congressman Hyde, you agree we shouldn't jump to a military conclusion. But you also say that somewhere down the line that would be necessary, if it was necessary, do it, don't hesitate.

HYDE: Well, I think if, ah, Honduras has a reasonable fear of invasion from Nicaragua, ah, I think we should have an obligation to, ah, assure their security. I would disagree a little bit with Jim, my good friend. I would go to the Soviet Union, not necessarily to the U.N. Ah, they would have difficulty, ah, ah, taking time off from beating up on South Africa and Israel to deal with this. But the Soviet Union, which, it's their ship, it was loaded in Odessa, it came direct to Corinto, I would think, ah, asking them what they're doing and, ah, ah, would be more effective.

LEHRER: Let me ask you this, Congressman Hyde, and then we have to move on. Ah, you also said you doubted those MiGs are there. What do you think is goin' on here then?

HYDE: Well, I think, ah, it's interesting if some disinformation is planted. Jim said the intelligence community leaked the story. He knows something I don't know. It could have come from anywhere. Ah, it has created some theater for the media. Ah, but, ah, Ortega has been... SHANNON: I deny that, sir. HYDE: You deny that affirmatively. SHANNON: Yes. Yes. HYDE: Ortega has been predicting an invasion. Ah, they may be trying to create a flurry of activity to say, 'See what I mean. America has designs on invading us,' which I don't, which I'm sure we don't.

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MACNEIL: How plausible, do you think, are Professor Rubinstein's theses on what the Soviets might be up to, or hypothesis? HYDE: Well, yes, I think it makes sense that the Soviets, worst-case scenario, they do have MiGs in there to see what our reaction would be. They may have anticipated a Mondale victory, who knows, when they started the ship out. But, it is plausible. But, again, it doesn't make sense. It would make liars out of the Sandinistas. The Soviets have also said there are MiGs in

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there and it would certainly ruin any propaganda value that the Nicaraguans think they have, the Sandinistas, rather, with the Contadora countries.

MACNEIL: What's your view of the possible Soviet motivation, Congressman Shannon? SHANNON: I don't know what the Soviet motivation would be. I think that the tensions between the Soviet Union and the United States can lead to an awful lot of unfathomable kinds of actions on both sides, unless we strengthen them, strengthen the relationship and relieve some of those tensions. But, I just have great difficulty seeing any rationale at all at this particular point, either one of political embarrassment or one to try to provoke us for any kind of nefarious reason, why the Soviets would do this. It would be foolhardy and I don't think anybody would gain from it, so I just don't believe it's the case. And I think that, if our intelligence continues to track these ships and these crates, as I'm sure they will, we'll find that it wasn't the case.

MACNEIL: Professor Rubinstein, given the past history of relations between the U.S. and the Soviet Union at moments of crisis, when there's a desire to have no misunderstandings, the U.S. is reported already to have talked to the Soviet Union about this. Is it likely, how will the Soviet leadership tend to behave? Would they say, privately, 'Look, there aren't any MiGs in there,' or would they say, 'It's none of your business,' or would they see the thing blowing up so much that they might want to come clean privately? RUBINSTEIN: I think everything you've said would be a possible reaction on the part of the Soviets. I don't know what we said to them. But, you know, this is not the Cuban missile crisis. And it would be, I think, foolhardy of us to act as if there is a major crisis brewing between the Soviet Union and the United States over those crates. It may very well be that the U.S. intelligence community pre-empted a crisis by announcing that there was this Soviet ship that behaved erratically, that zigzagged its way around the coast of South America, came up the Pacific coast and tried to off-load rather secretly and, in so doing, it may very well have alerted the Kremlin to the fact that, if there was an attempt to send in aids, that they'd better back down or, at least, they have time to back down. So, I think in retrospect, if there is no crisis, part of the credit probably has to go to the intelligence sources that notified us in the first place.